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COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

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B-206050

FEBRUARY 9, 1982

RELEASED

The Honorable Bob Packwood
The Honorable Mark O. Hatfield
United States Senate



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Subject: Proposed Consolidations of Smokejumper Bases
in the Forest Service's Western Regions
(CED-82-39)

On October 8 and October 20, 1981, respectively, you both forwarded to us a copy of a letter from Ms. Bette C. Weaver concerning the closing of the Forest Service's Siskiyou Smokejumper Base in southern Oregon and asked us to respond to her concerns.

A smokejumper base is a permanent, year-round site with facilities to train and house smokejumpers, assist clerical and supervisory personnel, and support aircraft which fly smokejumpers to a forest fire. The Siskiyou base is one of four smokejumper bases in the Service's region 6. The Service has decided to close the Siskiyou base and to maintain the region's three other bases as permanent facilities.

In her letter Ms. Weaver said that the Service's decision to no longer use the Siskiyou base as a permanent facility should be delayed until a review can be made of the Service's plans and proposed expenditures to close, expand, or relocate smokejumper bases in regions 1, 4, and 5 which are contiguous to region 6. Ms. Weaver said that the Service has provided her with information on its plans to consolidate and close bases in region 6 but has refused to divulge any information on planned expenditures in the other regions and that sources within the Service indicated that millions are involved. She asked that our Office obtain the planned expenditure information.

Ms. Weaver also asked that we look into the Service's practices of leasing versus buying helicopters, planes, and other facilities. She said that the Service's leasing agreements seem to be strongly in favor of the lessors, according to her inside sources.

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In accordance with discussions with your offices, we agreed to request and provide you with available information on any Forest Service study of planned closures, expansions, or re-alignments of smokejumper bases in the three other western regions. We agreed also that, if such a study has been prepared but the Service did not feel it appropriate to release its results, or if an overall study has not been prepared, we would inquire as to the Service's reasons for not releasing the study or for not preparing such a study.

In regard to the matter of the Service's lease-versus-purchase practices, we agreed to respond by citing any past findings we have reported on the lease-versus-purchase practices of the Service or other Federal agencies.

The information presented below is based on discussions with the Acting Assistant Director of Fire Management and the Aviation Planning Group Leader of the Forest Service's Aviation and Fire Management office in Washington, D.C., and a review of pertinent office files and records. We did not visit any of the smokejumper bases in question nor did we discuss Ms. Weaver's letter with her. On the lease-versus-purchase question, we reviewed reports issued by our Office from 1971 through 1981. We made our review in accordance with GAO's current "Standards for Audit of Government Organizations, Programs, Activities, and Functions."

The Forest Service has not made a cost/savings study of closures, realignments, or expansions of smokejumper bases in regions 1, 4, 5, and 6. It did, however, study the operations of selected smokejumper bases in these regions in 1978 and reported the results in January 1979. (Ms. Weaver was furnished a copy of that report.) The report showed significant overlaps in the operating areas (an optimum area was assumed to have a 150-mile radius with delivery of jumpers in 1 hour or less) of the smokejumper bases in these four regions. The report recommended that the number of smokejumper bases be reduced from nine to five. The Siskiyou base, which closed at the end of the 1981 fire season, was one of the four bases recommended for closure. The Acting Assistant Director of Fire Management said that this study did not attempt to calculate or show the costs involved in closing or consolidating the bases versus the savings expected to occur from such actions. The report showed only where the overlaps occurred and recommended how they could be eliminated.

The Aviation Planning Group Leader said that the Service does not have any data showing planned expenditures for consolidations or closures of smokejumper bases in regions 1, 4, and 5. He said that the report recommended that the smokejumper bases at Boise, Idaho (region 4), La Grande, Oregon (region 6), and Grangeville, Idaho (region 1), be closed and that the base at McCall, Idaho (region 4), be expanded. The base at Boise was closed at the end of the 1979 fire season; the bases at La Grande

and Grangeville are still open. Before any expansion of the McCall base is undertaken (this work is necessary before La Grande and Grangeville could be closed), an engineering study of the facility requirements at McCall would be necessary. However, before such a study could be accomplished, the funds needed for the study must be allocated, and this action has not occurred. The Aviation Planning Group Leader said that the Aviation and Fire Management office was not certain when and if such funds would be allocated.

The Service is developing a system to conduct cost/benefit analyses of its activities in preventing, detecting, and fighting forest fires. Work to create such a system was called for by the Senate Committee on Appropriations in August 1978. Since then the Service has been trying to devise a system to provide information that would help improve the efficiency of all expenditures for suppressing forest fires. Specific objectives are to determine

- the best national budget level for the National Forest System fire activities,
- the effects of alternative national budget levels,
- the relationship between costs and benefits, and
- the best mix of personnel and equipment at a given budget level.

The Acting Assistant Director of Fire Management said that work on the first two objectives essentially is complete and that work on the last two objectives should be completed in about 2 years (sometime in 1984). The system could then be used to measure and evaluate the costs and expected benefits of using different mixes of fire-suppression activities--smokejumpers, helitack units, rappellers, ground crews, tankers, and so forth.

As to the matter of lease-versus-purchase practices of the Service and other Federal agencies, we identified over 300 reports issued by our Office during the period 1971 through 1981 dealing with aircraft, leases, and facility leasing. Our research indicated that most of the reports dealt with military aircraft and the activities of the General Services Administration in providing facilities for various Federal agencies. None dealt with the issue of alternative costs of leasing versus purchasing helicopters, planes, and other facilities in situations involving the types of facilities and operations at smokejumper bases.

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We have discussed the information in this report with your offices and, as requested, we did not obtain agency comments.

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As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 5 days after its issue date. At that time we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others on request.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Henry Eschwege".

Henry Eschwege
Director